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ABSTRACT

The question of whether readers subjectively perceive the meaning of written materials is a specific form of the more general issue of whether human beings make or find knowledge. The subjectivist paradigm asserts that the first priority in the search for knowledge is the individual's awareness of personal motives for obtaining that knowledge. The simplest path to understanding the perception of meaning is, therefore, awareness of the role of the individual's motivationally based language system as the agency of consciousness and self-direction. (Author/KS)

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THE QUESTION OF WHETHER READERS MAKE MEANING IS A SPECIFIC FORM OF THE GENERAL ISSUE OF WHETHER WE HUMAN BEINGS MAKE OR FIND OUR OWN KNOWLEDGE. AS I HAVE DISCUSSED IN SEVERAL CONTEXTS IN THE RECENT PAST, MY VIEW IS THAT IT IS MORE PRODUCTIVE TO UNDERSTAND KNOWLEDGE AS HAVING BEEN MADE BY PEOPLE, IN OUR OWN BEHALF. I FORMULATED THIS PROPOSITION AS THE SUBJECTIVE PARADIGM, WHICH ASSUMES THAT THE FIRST PRIORITY IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF KNOWLEDGE IS THE KNOWER'S AWARENESS OF HIS MOTIVES FOR SEEKING THE KNOWLEDGE, AND THAT THE FINAL AUTHORITY FOR KNOWLEDGE IS ITS CAPABILITY OF SERVING COLLECTIVE OR INTERSUBJECTIVE INTERESTS. EVERY POINT IN THE KNOWLEDGE-MAKING PROCESS IS REGULATED BY A SUBJECT--THAT IS, A PERSON. THE REGULATION OF KNOWLEDGE BY OBJECTS (SUCH AS LITERARY TEXTS) IS ILLUSORY WHEN THESE OBJECTS ARE CONSIDERED THE ORIGIN OF EXPERIENCE. WHEN AN OBJECT IS CONCEIVED OF AS INDEPENDENT OF PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE, ITS OBJECTIVE ASPECT VARIES WITH THE MOTIVES OF THE PERCEIVER; ITS INDEPENDENCE--OR OBJECTIVITY--IS A MENTAL CONSTRUCTION AND IT CANNOT BE ASSUMED TO APPLY IN ALL CASES IN WHICH THE OBJECT IS PERCEIVED. FROM THE INFANTILE ONSET OF LANGUAGE AND INTELLIGENCE, AS PIAGET AND OTHERS HAVE SHOWN, OBJECTIVITY IS CONFERRED ON EXPERIENCE BECAUSE, FOR ALL PEOPLE, IT IS PSYCHOLOGICALLY ADAPTIVE TO CONSTRUE CERTAIN PERCEPTIONS AS OBJECTS. AT THIS TIME IN THE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION, AS FREUD, HUSSERL, BRIDGMAN, AND POOLE HAVE ARGUED, ACTS OF OBJECTIFICATION NO LONGER DIRECTLY PASS FOR ABSOLUTELY AUTHORITATIVE KNOWLEDGE, AND THEY ARE OF DIMINISHED COGNITIVE UTILITY WHEN VIEWED AS PART OF AN OBJECTIVE UNIVERSE. RATHER, AN ACT OF OBJECTIFICATION IS A SUBORDINATE FUNCTION OF, AND A MOTIVATED RESULT OF, SUBJECTIVE INITIATIVE.

OUR PROFESSION, THE ORGANIZED STUDY OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE, HAS NOT BEEN SYMPATHETIC TO SUBJECTIVITY, EVEN THOUGH, IN PRIVATE CONTEXTS, MANY, IF NOT MOST, ALLOW THE SUBJECTIVITY OF INTERPRETIVE EFFORTS. IN MAINTAINING THAT LITERARY AND LINGUISTIC MEANINGS ARE FOUND AND NOT MADE, THE PROFESSION TEACHES THAT OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE IS THE STANDARD, AND THAT THE CLOSER THE RESEMBLANCE BETWEEN OUR KNOWLEDGE AND THAT OF THE QUANTITATIVE SCIENCES, THE MORE AUTHORITATIVE OUR KNOWLEDGE

WILL BE. MOREOVER, THOSE WHO DO NOT CONSCIOUSLY AFFIRM THE QUANTITATIVE STANDARDS OF KNOWLEDGE, SUCH AS THOSE TEACHERS WHO, DAILY, NEGOTIATE INTERPRETIVE SUBJECTIVITY AS A PRAGMATIC MATTER, HAVE NO CONCEPTUAL ALTERNATIVE TO OBJECTIVITY; OTHERS WHO CONSCIOUSLY DOUBT THE EFFICACY OF OBJECTIVE THINKING ARE TACITLY GOVERNED BY WHAT WHITEHEAD CALLED THE "STRUGGLE BACK" TO AN OBJECTIVE POSITION. SUCH CRITICS USUALLY CLAIM THAT THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IS USELESS, OUTDATED, AND NONEXISTENT ANYWAY. IN MY JUDGMENT, ANYONE WHO CANNOT SEPARATE THE TWO PERSPECTIVES MUST BE A SOLIPSIST.

SUBJECTIVE CRITICISM IS THE DISCIPLINED STUDY OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE UNDER THE ASSUMPTION OF THE SUBJECTIVE PARADIGM. IT AIMS TO DEVELOP KNOWLEDGE, TO DETERMINE EACH PERSON'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIS KNOWLEDGE, AND TO ASSEMBLE COLLECTIVE INTERESTS THAT WILL ENLARGE THE ADAPTABILITY OF KNOWLEDGE. NONE OF THESE PURPOSES ARE SEPARABLE FROM ONE ANOTHER. ONCE YOU AND I ENTER EITHER A CONVERSATION OR A CLASSROOM, WE ARE PROPOSING KNOWLEDGE, BEARING RESPONSIBILITY, AND DEFINING A COMMUNITY OF INTEREST. THERE IS NOTHING OUTSIDE OF THOUGHT AND INTERPERSONAL NEGOTIATION THAT CAN AUTHORIZE WHAT PEOPLE BELIEVE THEY KNOW.

IF A READER BEGINS THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE BY ADMITTING THAT HE IS AIMING TO MAKE KNOWLEDGE, HE HAS ESTABLISHED A PROVISIONAL AUTHORITY FOR WHATEVER HE PROPOSES; THE AUTHORITY IS SUBSEQUENTLY EITHER RATIFIED OR MODIFIED THROUGH NEGOTIATION. NEITHER THE ASSUMPTION NOR THE PRETENSE OF TRUTH IS NECESSARY WHEN THE CONCERN IS ONLY FOR THE LOCAL AUTHORITY OF KNOWLEDGE PROPOSALS. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EACH READER FOR HIS MEANING, AND TO THE OTHER PARTIES, IS AN ITEM IN THE COLLECTIVE NEGOTIATION. TWO READERS IN AGREEMENT WITH EACH OTHER ON A COMMON SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE FORM A PEDAGOGICAL COMMUNITY WHICH WILL, ULTIMATELY, EITHER DISBAND, SYNTHESIZE THE NEW KNOWLEDGE, OR FORM A NEW COMMUNITY. IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO CLAIM AN INTERPRETATION FOR A LITERARY WORK IN ISOLATION FROM A COMMUNITY, EVEN THOUGH IT SEEMS THAT ONE CAN READ A POEM, DECIDE WHAT IT MEANS, AND THEN KEEP IT A SECRET. SUCH AN INTERPRETATION HAS THE SAME EPISTEMOLOGICAL STATUS AS AN UNREMEMBERED DREAM. ITS LACK OF NEGOTIATIVE PRESENCE RENDERS IT FUNCTIONALLY NONEXISTENT. IF IT IS FORGOTTEN,

IT MIGHT AS WELL NOT HAVE TAKEN PLACE; IF EVEN IT SUBSEQUENTLY EMERGES IN UNEXPECTED CONTEXTS, THOSE CONTEXTS WILL DEMAND AND TEST ITS RESPONSIBILITY. THE DEGREE TO WHICH AN INTERPRETATION IS NOT A PART OF A COMMUNITY IS THE DEGREE TO WHICH IT IS NOT KNOWLEDGE AT ALL.

THE INTERCONNECTION OF KNOWLEDGE, RESPONSIBILITY FOR IT, AND ITS NECESSARY ACTION IN HUMAN PLURALITIES IS FOUNDED ON THE CONCEPTION OF LANGUAGE AS SYMBOLIZATION, AS DEFINED BY CASSIRER AND LANGER, AND OF INTERPRETATION AS MOTIVATED RESYMBOLIZATION. AS I DISCUSSED IN A RECENT ESSAY, FOR EACH CHILD LANGUAGE ORIGINATES AND GROWS IN A COMMUNITY OF TWO OR MORE PEOPLE WHERE THE IDENTIFICATION OF EXPERIENCE AND ITS EXPLANATION ARE THE SAME SET OF BEHAVIORS. AFTER THE CHILD HAS ACQUIRED SYNTACTICAL LANGUAGE, AN EXPLANATION USUALLY APPEARS DIFFERENT FROM A SIMPLE IDENTIFICATION, BECAUSE THIS OLDER CHILD IS AWARE OF HAVING ASKED FOR, PARTICULARLY, AN EXPLANATION. HE IS AWARE, THAT IS, OF HIS MOTIVATED PARTICIPATION IN THE SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE. THIS SUBJECTIVE AWARENESS CHANGES LINGUISTIC RESYMBOLIZATION INTO EXPLANATORY INTERPRETATION. THE MOST GENERAL MEANS OF DISTINGUISHING LINGUISTIC ACTS FROM ONE ANOTHER IS ON THE BASIS OF THE MOTIVES FOR THEIR HAVING BEEN ARTICULATED OR PERCEIVED. FORMULATING A MOTIVATIONAL EXPLANATION FOR A LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE INVOLVES ASSIGNING A RESPONSIBILITY FOR IT (THE EXPERIENCE) AND DEFINING ITS COMMUNITY OF ADDRESS.

EXCEPT FOR SPEAKING, READING IS THE MOST TYPICAL LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE AND IT IS AND OUTGROWTH OF CHILDHOOD CONVERSATIONAL ACTIVITY. COMMENTING ON READING EXPERIENCES IS LIKEWISE DERIVED FROM INFANTILE TALKING HABITS, MOTIVES, AND CONTEXTS. EACH READER'S LANGUAGE SYSTEM, THEREFORE, MUST BE A DETERMINING FACTOR IN THE KNOWLEDGE HE DEVELOPS. WHEN A READER TAKES ACCOUNT OF HIS OWN LANGUAGE IN HIS PROPOSAL OF KNOWLEDGE, THE PROPOSAL IS SUBJECTIVELY AUTHORIZED AND COLLECTIVELY NEGOTIABLE. IN THIS PROCESS, THE RESPONSE STATEMENT (THE DIMENSIONS OF WHICH I HAVE DISCUSSED AT SOME LENGTH IN OTHER WORK) MAKES ROOM FOR A READER TO OBJECTIFY HIMSELF AND HIS EXPERIENCE, RELATIVE TO HIMSELF AND HIS COMMUNITY. HE SETS HIS READING EXPERIENCE APART AS THE OBJECT OF STUDY AND ESTABLISHES THE EXTENT OF HIS RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIS THOUGHTS, AND THIS RESPONSIBILITY BECOMES FUNCTIONAL WITHIN A PRE-ARTICULATED COLLECTIVE PURPOSE. IN

THIS WAY, CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE IS INSEPARABLE FROM THE READER'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR IT, AND FROM THE COLLECTIVE INTERESTS OF THE READER'S COMMUNITY.

SUBJECTIVE CRITICISM ASSUMES THAT EACH PERSON'S MOST URGENT MOTIVES ARE TO UNDERSTAND HIMSELF, AND THAT THE SIMPLEST PATH TO THIS UNDERSTANDING IS THROUGH THE AWARENESS OF ONE'S OWN MOTIVATIONALLY REGULATED LANGUAGE SYSTEM AS THE AGENCY OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF-DIRECTION. IN ENGLISH, THE "REAL" OBJECTS ARE WORDS AND TEXTS; THE SYMBOLIC OBJECTS ARE LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE. THE SUBJECT OF ENGLISH IS PEOPLE, WHO SPEAK, READ, AND WRITE.